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## THE BELIEF IN THE RESURRECTION AMONG THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

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There is a problem which arises for us in connection with the record of the religious life of the first generation of Christians. Why should belief in the resurrection have played such a supremely important part in this life? We know that if ever there was a time when religion was real, dominant, unquestionably controlling in men's lives, it was this time, and it was among at least the greatest of this first generation of Christians. And yet we know that when men since have read the record of these men's experience, and, having seen how all-pervading with them was the belief in a future life, have tried to use such a belief in a later day as a motive for Christian living, the result has been unsatisfactory. Time and time again it has been recognized that while men's outward conduct might be modified for the better by the hope of future reward and fear of punishment, men could not in their hearts become *Christians* through any such motive. The ages of the most unquestioning acceptance of the doctrine of immortality have not always been the ages of the greatest amount of true goodness. The man who will not do right for the love of right is not made a saint by believing that if he is good he will go to heaven.

But we need not look to other ages besides that of the apostles to find a contrast which shall give us food for thought. The standard-bearers of the contemporary Jewish orthodoxy, the Pharisees, were believers in the resurrection of the righteous dead. An account of their belief has been left us by Josephus.<sup>1</sup> The existence of this belief is strikingly evidenced by an incident recorded in the Book of Acts. St. Paul, at Jerusalem, pleading before the council of hostile Jews, had but to exclaim, "I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees: touching the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question;" immediately dissension arose among those who the moment before

<sup>1</sup> *Jewish War*, ii, viii, 14; *Antiquities*, xviii, 1, 3 f.

were united in opposition to him. The Pharisees acknowledged him now as a champion of the truth which they earnestly maintained in opposition to their liberal and worldly rivals, the Sadducees; they at once were lined up on his side (Acts 23:6-10; 24:21). The word "resurrection" acted for them as a party rallying cry. But if the Pharisees could hold this belief as strongly as this incident indicates, and yet religion could be with them so outward and superficial a thing that they became the typical hypocrites of all history, how is it that the same belief should appear a fundamental cause of the wonderful religious zeal of the first Christians? In those Christians true religion not only entered but possessed the heart; and everywhere we read that religion for them meant very largely belief in the resurrection.

Glance at the facts. These men learned their Christianity from the apostles' preaching; and what was the substance of that preaching? It had apparently two chief elements; and the record of it is nowhere better summed up than in the words describing for us St. Paul's discourse at Athens: "He preached Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18). Let it be granted that at a later day in the parts of the New Testament which reflect the life of the second generation of Christians, the doctrine of the resurrection falls relatively somewhat into the background; in the first generation, it is clearly evidenced by the records, the central objects of the faith of these men were Jesus *and* the resurrection. And not only do we find this in the reported sermons. The history of deeds shows it. When Jesus was crucified, his disciples were utterly disheartened. They *had* trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel; but now their faith was slain. But when they were convinced of Christ's resurrection, they were transformed. The resurrection made them, instead of discouraged, despairing peasants, the Christian church, that church militant, invincible, which set out promptly on the campaign which conquered the Roman Empire. An enthusiasm such as the world had never, and has never since, seen—that was put into them by the resurrection. A spirit of self-sacrifice surpassing in its results the work of armies—this the belief, which in other ages has called forth mere superficial good conduct, inspired in them. And what moved these first believers moved those to whom they spoke. With general consent the historical records bear witness that what gave

these first Christian evangelists their wonderful power to win victories for the faith was their preaching of the resurrection. Or look at it more individually, where we have motives revealed to us more intimately. I suppose that, rightly seen, there has been no life in the world's history, save only that of the Master, more wonderful than that of his servant St. Paul. Saul the zealous, but the disheartened, the embittered and the persecuting Pharisee, became that Paul whose Christian experience has apparently been unequaled in nineteen centuries. And what made this change in him? What was the cause of his conversion? The Jesus whom he had supposed forever slain appeared to him alive, giving him the certainty of his resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

It has been said that it is not to be expected that any age in history shall successfully analyze in consciousness its own life, nor rightly interpret the source and secret of its most characteristic power. And so in those early sermons of the apostles, recorded for us in the Book of Acts, we must not look to find an adequate explanation of *how* the belief in the resurrection made these men Christians. The truth appears somewhat more clearly in St. Paul's Epistles. Why did the possession of the same belief in a future life which could not make good men of the Pharisees, which has been utterly inadequate as a motive among subsequent generations of Christians, make saints of them? Wherein lay the difference? Was it not here? Jesus had proclaimed what was in effect a new doctrine—the doctrine that God is love, that God is our Father. Of this truth the Pharisees had not been believers; even the greatest of God's prophets had merely glimpsed it. It was not to be expected that Galilean peasants should in a short time, after no very profound experience, make it their own. God is love—how could men feel this? Jesus first showed by his own life what love was. Then he showed it by his death. The disciples now felt that love existed—felt it in a way that no men before ever could have felt it; but was God love? Had not love been defeated—proved powerless—slain on the cross? Was not love fruitless? Had not this world's order been shown to possess no answer for it but ruthless disregard? Then came the resurrection. Jesus, the all-loving, was the Christ. He was mankind's Master, he was the

<sup>2</sup> Cf. also I Cor. 15: 1-19, and especially vss. 14, 19.

Son of God. God is our Father, he is love. For to Jesus, and to the true follower of Jesus, defeat and death do not end all. God is on their side. Do we not see, then, why, for the first Christians, belief in the resurrection was so important? It meant to them the truth of Christ's teaching that God is love. It proved to them that God cared for them as a perfect Father for his dear children. And it was the power of God's love that made them saints.

Some men have perhaps believed in God's love without believing in immortality. That love has so clearly come into their lives, on this earth—they have had so much to live for—that even were death to end all, they felt that God was their Father. But in that first century, there was not so much to live for on earth. Life for the good man meant suffering and persecution and discouragement. The bad said, Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. When life held so little, and the world was so manifestly growing worse, and God's chosen people were apparently forsaken, St. Peter and St. John and St. Paul could not have believed that God is love had they not believed in the resurrection. God must show his love somewhere; and it was not clearly enough shown here. I do not mean that they believed in God's fatherhood *because* they believed in the resurrection. Belief in God's fatherhood is too wonderful a thing. The conviction that there is a future life, as a cause, is utterly inadequate to produce this belief as an effect. It was Jesus Christ who produced this belief in them. But it was not Jesus, known to be defeated and slain. It was Jesus Christ risen again, giving them the promise that they too should rise. The two beliefs, in God's fatherhood and in the resurrection, for men leading such lives, could not be separated. They were intimately bound together.

Mankind insistently demands for itself happiness. What estimate are we to put upon this demand? Is it a legitimate one? Is it pleasing to God? Those who have felt themselves competent to be the moral teachers of mankind have given very different answers to this question. There is on the one side the answer that the only good thing is the good will; that the doing of one's duty alone is valuable; and one does one's duty most fully when one does what is disagreeable, simply from a sense of duty. Happiness is not a good; we should not ask for it. And so, very recently, one thinker<sup>3</sup> has written, in

<sup>3</sup> Josiah Royce, *Hibbert Journal*, July, 1907.

arguing in favor of man's immortality, that the only proper ground for belief in life after death is that we have not the chance to finish doing our duty here. Hence we may believe that death does not end all, because we have a right to continue doing our duty. But we have no right to ask of God any other kind of satisfaction; we have no claim to be made happy; if we are not happy here, that gives us no evidence that we shall live hereafter, but only if we cannot finish doing our duty here. This on one side. On the other side men have held it right to teach that we should do good here simply in order to be happy hereafter—so important to them seemed happiness. Others have said that goodness simply is that conduct which produces the greatest happiness of the greatest number; the only object of goodness is to cause happiness. To look at a teaching on a considerably higher level, Robert Louis Stevenson says: to be happy "is the whole of culture, and perhaps two-thirds of morality."<sup>4</sup> That is, if I understand him correctly, the sole purpose, the sole test of success, in cultivating the mind and the heart, is the production of happiness; and of all the duty of mankind at large, two-thirds consists of the duty of being, and thereby of making others, happy. So vastly important, in his mind, was happiness. To be happy is not only man's privilege; it is his duty. Now between these extremes of opinion, where lies the truth?

We cannot believe that a man should be told to be good simply in order to gain happiness as an outward reward—happiness that is not involved in the goodness itself. That is not Christianity. Goodness does not come in that way. But this, I hold, is true. Duty alone, mere doing, cannot be separated from the rest of life. I do not do a thing better because I hate to do it. Christianity means that man's life must be whole—that feeling and thinking and willing must work together—that man must knowingly do right because he loves to, and must love to do what he knows is right. So duty and truth and happiness combine. There is a proverb, "Man is whole only when he plays." When he plays he is doing what he wants to do, and putting his whole self into the doing. And that is the ideal state. Joy is essential to man's true life; because without joy man can work only half-heartedly; and half-hearted work is always incomplete work. There is no such thing as duty completely done without happiness.

<sup>4</sup> "The Amateur Emigrant," *Works* (Scribners, New York, 1898), Vol. XV, p. 39.

To demand the chance to do our duties completely is to demand happiness; if the doing of duty is, so also is happiness, a right of mankind. Satisfaction—the heart's satisfaction—is an essential part of life.

This truth the apostles knew; and it is this fact which shows us the meaning of their faith in the resurrection. Unless there were satisfaction attainable, it could not be that this world is governed by our Father; and they had not attained satisfaction here. But they believed in the resurrection, they believed that they would gain satisfaction, happiness, wholeness of life, hereafter; and so they believed that God is love. And the power of God's love made them saints.

The writer to the Hebrews has expressed the truth for us: "Without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing *unto God*; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him" (Heb. 11:6).

For this reason, in spite of what some today say to the contrary, it is not a slight thing that we should have faith in life eternal. Belief in life eternal means belief that God is a rewarder; are we true children of God without it? Can we, without this belief, feel that God is our Father? We can only if we have not faced the problem of the world's misery—if for us, and for those we know, happiness and satisfaction are truly contained in this life. God grant that there may be many who, for themselves at least, need never face that problem! But for those who do face the problem—and how great numbers do!—belief in the life beyond the grave is an essential part of the belief that God is their Father.

But this, I think, is not the only lesson that we are to draw from the fact of the first Christians' soul-impelling faith in the resurrection. It should teach us, also, that in this present life we must not underestimate the importance, the true value of happiness. There is, of course, constantly at our hands, an entirely wrong way of valuing happiness. It is incompatible with the spirit of the true Christian that he should faithlessly, as not seeing Him who is invisible, demand always satisfaction in the sphere of the immediate and the tangible. Suffering that is physical, whether in our bodies or our estates, may prove our best training-school. Such trying of our faith may work patience, and patience may have her perfect work. As material

things fade, the things of the spirit may be grasped. Our crosses can raise us nearer God. Nor will the true Christian, if he has known the heart of Christian doctrine, forget that in a world where the most broadly and profoundly significant fact is the interrelationship between man and all his fellows, some men, individually deserving of happiness, may be singled out by the great Disposer to suffer vicariously. The suffering of one brings happiness to another, mitigates the sufferings of a third, results from the personal imperfections of a fourth. And the first, if he is a Christian, will not lose faith because he suffers. He will see blessedness in following Him who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame. But—let us not go too far. Suffering can at best be only a transient good. It can never be in accord with the *ideal* that any man should suffer. Has illness or temporal loss proved a blessing because the man was being spoiled by prosperity? If he was, where lay the fault? Not, certainly, in the prosperity, which consisted in God's good gifts; but in the man himself, who used these gifts wrongly. Or have we reconciled ourselves to believe that it is God's loving will that we should suffer that others may be benefited? Let us hold fast to this faith; but let it not blind us to the truth that the ultimate *object* of vicarious suffering lies not within itself; that object is to root out and remove from others sin and imperfection, the causes of suffering, that in them may be developed that wholeness of life which is Christianity, and which includes, as one of its essential elements, happiness. Suffering may be a means—a means so high that we call it divine; but the *ideal*, which is the end for which we always strive, does and must involve perfect happiness.

Then if happiness, so much more truly than suffering, is divine, it is a thing which, as Christians, we should truly desire to see, in our present lives, and all around us. For the apostles, belief in future bliss, we saw, was not the cause of their belief that God is love, but it was intimately, probably inseparably, bound up with this belief. Men knowing life's misery as they knew it *must* believe in future happiness or not believe in God's fatherhood. And many of us are like them. But if the conviction that there is happiness laid up for us has such power to aid us to the knowledge of God's love, must not the possession of true happiness here and now have vastly greater



power to aid the entrance of God's love into our hearts? We may not use our happiness aright; we may be spoiled by prosperity; but if so, the fault will lie in us alone. Happiness is God's own gift. The heart's satisfaction is the heart's knowledge of God. Let us never be forgetful of this. It is easy for the happy man to have faith; and he *needs* faith. To be happy, to produce happiness, is one of our profoundest duties. If in play, true play, alone can man be *whole*, then let play be an essential part of our life's ideal; be it our aim that all our work shall be to us play, and that our play shall be always useful and productive. For Christianity means wholeness. By causing happiness, let us be ever bringing into the life of mankind God's love; for the power of God's love has made men saints; and the knowledge of this love is the profoundest need of man.